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## Nicolina Nikoleski: Life for Dance, Dance for Life

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Written by Kristin Vuković



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Bharatanatyam dancer Nicolina Nikoleski is Croatian by birth, but she moves to an Indian beat.

I met Nicolina Nikoleski on the evening we were leaving New Delhi to return home to New York City. It was a chilly day in early January, and Nicolina

had a cold. Despite her illness, she ventured out to see a performance with a mutual friend at the American School. For Nicolina, dancing is life, and life is dancing—and she rarely misses a beat.



At the tender age of four, Nikoleski's mother enrolled her in Croatia's best artistic gymnastics club, Sokol Klub, located at the Mažuranićev Trg in Zagreb across from the Croatian National Theatre. "It was my mother's dream and wish to be a gymnast, so her love for this discipline brought me to the sports hall," Nikoleski said. "I lived for those hours of training."

In primary school, Nikoleski continued with the sport and was a member of "New Zagreb" and "Maksimir" rhythmic gymnastics clubs, where she competed in tournaments.

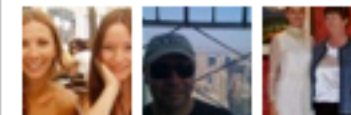
Training also included ballet lessons, as well as stretching and strengthening exercises, which fueled a deeper connection to the physical expression of her inner world.



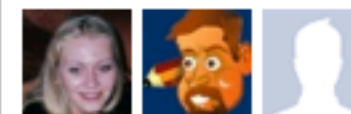
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From a very early age, Nikoleski knew she wanted to be a professional dancer. "I was very firm, clear and confident about my life calling," she said. "As for my parents, they thought this was just a phase." But her love for dance only became more passionate as time progressed, and she finally convinced her parents to enroll her in Laban's High School for Dance & Rhythmic —Škola Ane Maletić in Zagreb.

At Laban's, it became clear to Nikoleski that she was born for dance. "It literally became something I couldn't live or breathe without," she said. Her

dedication to dance was apparent to her teachers—she was the only student in the school with no absences during all four years. "I used to come early to school and wait for the cleaning lady to open the doors," Nikoleski recalled. "That same lady had to push me out in evening as she was closing the school!"

For Nikoleski, every gesture created a story. "My life was filled with living dance," she said. "As I was driving, in the trams or busses, observing people on the streets—everything was a constant performance, a premiere of a new piece in each minute."

During Nikoleski's time at Laban's, a famous Indian dancer, Sonal Mansingh, came to perform classical Indian dance for the students at the Croatian National Theater. Nikoleski was so impressed by the experience that she secretly longed to learn Bharatanatyam, a South Indian classical dance style, which is the most ancient of all the classical Indian dance forms.

After graduating from Laban's, Nikoleski still wanted to be a dancer. "To the horror of my parents, I said I wanted to study at the dance academy," she said. Nikoleski followed her heart and joined a physical theatre group under the direction of the famous Croatian actress Senka Bulić. "We performed a lot—in Avignon Festival, Casablanca, Vienna, Paris . . . working with her was a very precious experience."



Dedicated as ever, Nikoleski followed through with her goals and went on to study at the Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance in Austria. She spent one year at Salzburg and passed the audition for the world-famous Folkwang Hochschule Essen in Germany—the epicenter of contemporary dance. "Pina

Bausch was a principal there, and her legendary dancers were my teachers," she said. "There were students from all parts of the world, and I learned about life, people and different cultures."

Five years later, Nikoleski made the leap and learned Bharatanatyam. "My first steps in Bharatanatyam were so different than any I'd ever danced before in my life," she said. "But then after a few weeks, like magic, my body recognized this completely different dance vocabulary and adapted to it as if I'd been doing it my whole life."

In December 2004, Nikoleski transferred to New Delhi as part of a scholarship from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, where she joined Ganesa Natyalaya Dance Institute and studied under Padmashree Guru Dr. Saroja Vaidyanathan. Her incredible journey gave her the opportunity to perform all over India with some of the greatest names of Indian classical dance and music.



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I wondered how Nikoleski adjusted to life in India. "Living in Delhi has been the richest experience for me," she said. "Residing in the country of the origin of Art that I love so much made me completely open to grasping every aspect of Bharatanatyam, music, and yoga." Enveloped in Delhi's warm and welcoming dance community, Nikoleski seems to have found her home away from home.



"Indians are simply overwhelmed by an artist coming all the way from Croatia, from another part of the world, who has so much interest and admiration for Indian culture and has adopted it so genuinely," she said. "They are eager to know about my country, where I come from, and also to better understand Croatian culture." Nikoleski is a cross-cultural phenomenon, the epitome of Art's power to break barriers and cross borders, bringing people together through expression and commonality of emotion.

"Dance has the most amazing transformational energy, a creative power that almost has a healing effect on a dancer's body and her whole existence," Nikoleski said. "It is

a never-ending journey, a path of wonders and surprises always waiting. Each dance takes me to another dimension and experience that cannot easily be put into words. It is the here and now, the bliss of being conscious of every breath, movement, and emotion."

*Nikolina Nikoleski is presently teaching dance at the French Embassy School in New Delhi. She has worked intensely for the past six and a half years with Indian artists, and looks forward to continuing her process and sharing her knowledge with her Croatian and international colleagues. To learn more, visit [nikolinanikoleski.com](http://nikolinanikoleski.com).*